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THE ASSASSINATION MANIA: ITS SOCIAL AND ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

BY DR. F. L. OSWALD.

THE cure of social, as of physical, disorders has often been baffled by the obscurity of their cause; and the very name of Anarchism may have tended to complicate the problem of its expurgation. Insanity admits of no political remedies. If the international league of malcontents and millennium-mongers were really trying to realize their ideals by the abolition of organized government, the investigation of their complaint should be delegated to an expert in mental pathology.

Like the homicidal sectarians of Mohammedanism, the King-slaying fanatics have profited by that appearance of intellectual incompetence. It did not seem worth while to controvert the ravings of madmen, whose tenets could hardly fail to be refuted by the logic of practical experiments. That the adoption of their name was suggested by an anticipation of that convenient mistake may be doubted, but their four last crimes have at least revealed the true significance of their conspiracy. It is not a revolt of lawlessness against order, but of misery against happiness, of hunger against euepeptic beatitude. The four most prominent victims were not selected as representatives of despotism, but as representatives of social prerogatives.

Hence, also, the suggestive fact that the assassins were natives of the country where the contrasts of wealth and poverty have reached their most cruel extreme. Compared with such autocrats as Nero and Commodus, the statesmen of modern Italy were paragons of liberalism. But the Cæsars, for three centuries and a half, paid an enormous license for the privileges which their successors arrogate by right of descent. Their government was a mutual-benefit contract between rulers and subjects. A sum ex-

ceeding a million dollars a day was set aside for *panes et circenses*—free circus games and the free distribution of corn and oil. The Circus Maximus was crowded three times a week, and at least once a month the prodigious expenditure was augmented by special donations, intended sometimes to aid the celebration of national holidays, but oftener to conciliate the good-will of the masses. Every Roman citizen could claim his share of the free commissariat, or receive its commutation value in coin; and the gate fee of the luxurious public baths was so small that a compromise payment of a few *sesterces* would admit dozens of impecunious applicants. In consideration of such inducements, the descendants of Cato could afford to connive at the incidental pranks of their rulers, many of whom added social to financial liberality, and renounced private amusements to avoid the very appearance of exclusiveness.

In the Middle Ages, free shows were limited to ecclesiastical pageants, but not a few of the warlike princes were munificent to the degree of prodigality; and Italy, at that time, was a sparsely settled country abounding with mountain parks and free hunting grounds.

Forests, fun and freedom have now vanished together. Italy has become a treadmill, where hundreds of thousands can by incessant labor just earn enough to toil another day. The prospect of reaching a land where they can enjoy a few leisure hours between sleep and drudgery impels whole families to stint themselves in food to save the price of an emigration ticket. Holidays, in the ancient sense of the word, are known only from tradition in some agricultural districts of the peninsula. I have seen Spain and Northern Africa, but never anything to resemble the dreariness, the joylessness and hopeless squalor of some villages in Southern Italy.

The enjoyments of the privileged classes, on the other hand, have become more comprehensive from century to century. Science has aided art in beautifying the country seats of the Apennines. In the Euganean Hills there are villas rivalling in splendor the palaces of the Spanish Moriscos, and surpassing them in the matter of domestic and sanitary contrivances, literary treasures and curiosities of natural history. Where the Bembos and Medicis had ten topics of conversation, the Cavours and Lamarmoras have a thousand. Game has been gleaned from

the wilderness of the mountains and fenced in the hunting preserves of the rich. One by one, the means of secular enjoyment have become class privileges. The thermæ of Caracalla are in ruins; municipal regulations bar the poor from the bathing waters of the corporation limits. Hunters, caught red-handed without a license costing five dollars a month, are jailed like highway robbers. Dancers, picnickers, arrangers of musical entertainments are charged another license. The right of free assembly has been curtailed to prevent indignation meetings. Before orators can harangue a crowd, they have to apply for a magistrate's permit, and deposit a *caution*, to cover the probable amount of a fine, in case the police censor should see fit to complain. The dog-tax has eliminated the poor man's pet. The privilege of fishing, like that of hunting, has to be paid for in advance.

Thus, deprived of more pleasant pastimes, Pietro Farina has had time to brood over the problems of existence, with such results as might have been anticipated.

For a long series of centuries, the government of legitimate kings, with their prestige of divine sanction, claimed an infallibility that expiated its arrogance by fostering a belief in legislative omnipotence. The crowned representative of Providence pretended to hold the keys of national weal or woe; so, if things went wrong, his government must be to blame, and, in extremes of woe-fulness the victims of hard times may really have conceived the idea of seeking relief in the plan of abolishing government altogether. How far further reflection has modified their views on that point may be inferred from the disputes of their leaders. But they all agreed that the injustice of existing social arrangements had become insupportable, and that, complaints having proved unavailing, the problem of reform must be attempted by more drastic means.

That the battle-cry of tyrannicide was a mere pretext has been abundantly proved by the history of the last twenty-two months, as well as by the proximate causes of the French Revolution, and of the conspiracies against the lives of numerous European sovereigns and statesmen. The "discouragement of oppression by making the trade of the oppressor a perilous one," was, indeed, a shibboleth of many anarchistic orators; but almost whenever those theories were supposed to have ripened into action, the wrath of the perpetrators was really excited by sins of omission,

rather than of commission,—and often only by the mere vague suspicion of such negative sins.

King Humbert was, all in all, about the most liberal sovereign in Europe—easy-going, jovial, nervously averse to harsh enforcements of his prerogatives, a philosopher, but doing his best to hold the balance of justice between the clericals and secularists, fond of fun, though at his own expense, affable, always accessible to petitioners and reform projectors. But the fact remained that his rule had failed to relieve the frightful distress of the lower classes. Times were still as hard as during the last three years of his father's reign, when dozens of villages were depopulated by mass-emigration, because the inhabitants could no longer live and pay their taxes. What right had he to be junketing at Monza or bantering the custodian of the Museo Borbonico, and attending masked balls, while thousands of his subjects were perishing from actual starvation? "How did he dare to be fat while we shrivelled?" said an attendant at the execution of Louis XVI.

That he was a representative gentleman was also the only crime of President Carnot, as of Premier Canovas, who, though an active promoter of reforms, had contrived to accumulate a little bric-a-brac, while so many of his countrymen had to sell their furniture for bread. Carnot, in his own way, was even a leader of democratic progress, an opponent of despotism in church and state. But he kept a coach and several liveried flunkies, and for the time being came as near to kingship as circumstances in France would permit. His country-lodge of Montbrissot, too, testified against him; he had found time for the enjoyment of leisure, while there were bread riots at Marseilles. His intellectual abilities only aggravated his demerits. There was no excuse for his failure to initiate a much-needed millennium.

In the case of the Empress of Austria, the absence of direct provocation was even more evident. For the last three years of her life, she had abstained from all personal interference in politics. Two of her chamberlains had been discharged to save money for travelling expenses. She had accepted a loan from her brother-in-law to erect a monument to Heinrich Heine, the apostle of mental emancipation. The poor old lady really represented nothing but poetical ideals; but she had established a fairy-palace on the island of Cyprus and managed to enjoy life after a fashion, though mainly by a triumph of mind over the persistent

spite of fortune. The tragic fates of her son and her royal kinsman had failed to pay her debt to Nemesis.

The selection of her person as the object of a brutal vendetta reveals, indeed, the ugliest by-purpose of anarchistic conspiracies—the chance for the gratification of a blackguard's spite against intellectual superiority. The First Consul, during the era of his military miracles and reconstructive achievements, was repeatedly attacked by plotters who spared him in his subsequent rôle of a self-seeking dictator. Frederick the Great made more enemies by his epigrams than by the appropriation of Silesia and Poland. The Romans, who had endured the ruffian Sulla and did their best to endure the monster Tiberius, revolted against the dictatorship of Divus Julius. President Balmaceda of Chili, a scholar, philosopher, philanthropist and patriot, was hounded to death by the very classes of the populace he had tried to befriend. They must have been warned by a misgiving that the land of the Spanish-American nations would not look upon his like again, but were tired of listening to the acknowledgment of his merits, as the ostracizers of Aristides expressed it with cynical candor.

Incidentally, the "age of assassinations" also suggests a suspicion that the prospect of death has lost its terrors for a large class of criminals. Sanguinary conspiracies were almost as frequent during the middle of the fifteenth century, and again at the beginning of the seventeenth, but the plotters preferred to lurk in ambush or used poison instead of steel. The constructor of the "Infernal Machine" was victimized by his own contrivance, but only through the accident of being delayed in a crowd, as he took to his heels a moment after applying his match. Our latter-day reformers by assassination make no attempt to avoid their doom, and, indeed, they have mostly executed the programme of the Junta under circumstances that precluded the chance of escape.

Did they court notoriety at the price of martyrdom? It is more probable that they were done with life, and merely preferred indirect to direct methods of suicide. "This planet of ours is so large that I never urge anybody to leave it," says a British satirist, "but to those who insist to go I should always like to represent the expedience of not wasting themselves. Select a worthy travelling companion and earn the gratitude of mankind without extra expense."

Even thus, life-weary anarchists of the Bresci and Luchesi type

may have availed themselves of the chance to attain the approval of their Junta brethren, without delaying their predetermined departure more than a few weeks. Luchesi, in fact, admitted his regret that his calculations in that respect had been thwarted by the Swiss vote for the abolition of the death penalty. He had dismissed his hopes of the present life, as well as his fears of the future, and was impatiently ready to go; but he lacked the courage to make his own quietus, except by means of which fate had now inopportunately deprived him.

Switzerland might thus, after all, offer the safest refuge to retired sovereigns, and Mr. Welker, the editor of the *Berner Bund*, seriously proposed to extend that advantage to other countries, "by barring the privileges of the Stygian ferry to political assassins." Lock them up in Fort Spielberg, he says, or let the Provost Marshal of Irkutsk get his claws in their wool, but do not play their game by assisting them to cast off the burden of life. Let them know that, if they murder in haste, they will have to repent at leisure.

The plan of curing the assassination mania by the prescription that abated garroting has found advocates in Austria and Great Britain, but would still more decidedly involve the risk of mending the trump cards of the maniacs by furnishing them a pretext to rave against revivals of Oriental barbarism. Knouted Nihilists so invariably become popular heroes that the advisers of the present Tzar have induced him to abolish physical aggravations of the doom that obliterates their memory in the convict mines of the Far East.

The Swiss plan is the best. The arrangements of modern prisons make suicide almost impossible to wards of the Death Watch, and civilized nations should agree to subject convicted anarchists to the same system of surveillance. Life-weary desperadoes may become less ready to run amuck if they know that mankind will compel them to bear the yoke of existence with added burdens.

F. L. OSWALD.